

Chargé d'Affaires Douglas Silliman
Commencement Address
American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
May 30, 2103

First of all, I would like to thank Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Dr. Barham Salih, Dr. Ali Saeed, President Athanasios Moulakis, the Board of Trustees and all of you who make up the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. It is an incredible honor to be here with you today at the second commencement ceremony of AUIS

Even more important, I want to congratulate the Class of 2013!
Alf mabrouk! Peeroza!

And of course, those congratulations also go to all the parents, family, friends and faculty who helped you reach this turning point in your lives. This day belongs to all of them as well.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I would like to explain to the graduates what I am going to do. Since you have been educated in an American-style university, I am going to subject you to an American-style commencement address. There will be a few jokes, a couple of quotes from important, famous people, a deep philosophical message in the middle and a stirring conclusion that will prepare you to begin your new lives outside of school.

And I will repeat several of the themes Dr. Moulakis used in his remarks although, since he is a professor and I am a diplomat, I will use smaller words.

So, let me begin. In my work as a diplomat, I often reach back into American history to find the wisdom of past generations, and I often look to the founding era of the United States for such advice. That period in American history was a time of great turmoil, of great change, and of great wisdom, and it produced a generation of American statesmen and thinkers that no subsequent generation has been able to match. One of my favorites among America's Founding Fathers is Thomas Jefferson – lawyer, inventor, scientist, architect, writer,

politician, experimental farmer, and country gentleman of Virginia -- not to mention the author of our Declaration of Independence and the 3rd President of the United States. Jefferson said something that I would like each of you graduates to hear as you depart the comfort and shelter of this fine institution and go out into the world: Jefferson said:

The harder I work, the luckier I seem to be.

Well, the good thing is that all of you graduating from AUIS already know how to work hard. Because getting a quality education requires work, commitment, and dedication. Your AUIS degree is a testament that you were challenged not to memorize and repeat the course material, but to think critically, to question conventional wisdom, to devise creative solutions to problems, and to strive for personal excellence. You learned the values of good citizenship, a strong work ethic, and personal integrity – all part of the AUIS mission statement and core values. These values are also the essence of perhaps my country's greatest export to the world -- an American-style liberal arts education. At the end of his life, the accomplishment of which Thomas Jefferson was most proud was not the Declaration of Independence, or doubling the size of the young United States with land purchases, or spreading crop rotation among farms in the Virginia countryside. It was his founding the University of Virginia. Because Jefferson knew that the core of every successful person's life, and of the life of the new United States, depended on knowledge, wisdom and moral character.

I believe deeply in the value of the kind of education you have received at AUIS because it will equip you to better face the realities of world. As young graduates in Iraq, you are going to grapple with some unique and difficult challenges.

When I have a difficult day at work – and believe me, there are a lot of difficult days where I work – I think about the future of this country and this region. But, when I do, I am reassured by the thought that this country's youth -- and especially each of you in this room tonight -- have the knowledge in your brain, the determination in your heart, and the strength of your character to build a bright future for Kurdistan and for all of Iraq.

That was the uplifting part of the speech. Now comes the difficult message.

As you begin the next chapter of your personal journeys, remember this: Nothing worthwhile is easy. You will have to continue work hard to be prepared to do those things you want to do in your life – to become a journalist, run for political office, start a business, cure patients of disease, bring peace to a troubled region, or help to alleviate poverty or fight for women’s rights.

But when you reach for such lofty goals, you will stumble. You will be tested. And sometimes, you will fail. And those opportunities you hoped for will not always be in your reach. But the education you got here at AUIS will help you to look at the obstacles you face differently, and get it right the next time. Or the time after that.

This is where Thomas Jefferson’s philosophy becomes important. It is not enough to graduate from the right school, or have the right connections, or be in the right place at the right time. The essence of what some call “luck” is the ability to prepare yourself to take advantage of the opportunities you want when they present themselves.

So when you feel discouraged, when you hear voices that say you can’t make a difference, when somebody tells you something is too hard – do not listen. Cling to your passion and your principles. Have the imagination to go beyond other people's expectations. Have confidence in your abilities. And have the courage to stay the course and work toward your goals. Progress, even personal progress, is never a straight line upwards.

Fifty years ago, another great American President, John F. Kennedy, told the 1963 graduating class of the American University in Washington, D.C. the following. He said:

Our problems are man-made – therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable – and we believe they can do it again.

I ask you tonight to take John Kennedy's challenge: be as big as you want to be. Strive for more than you think you realistically can accomplish. Do something no other human being has ever done. Go beyond what your family or your community expect of you. What you do with your education will decide not only your future, but the future of your family, your city, your country, this region, maybe the entire world. This is the greatest gift of your education – if you choose to do so, you can make a difference.

Now more than ever, the world needs what you, the graduates of the Class of 2013, have to offer. And if you work hard and stay prepared to seize those opportunities that come your way, I have every faith that you will succeed.

And now I send you off to start the real work of your lives. Think bigger; work harder. Thank you, and good luck.